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NID 85-044JX

SRI LANKA-INDIA: Aid to Refugees

Prime Minister Gandhi yesterday assured Sri Lankan refugees of support and protection in Tamil Nadu and ordered increased patrols of coastal waters between the two countries. [REDACTED]

Following a week of rising pressure from Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils, Gandhi told authorities in Tamil Nadu that New Delhi will provide funds to care for Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who have been fleeing the violence in northern Sri Lanka at a rate of more than 300 per day. Press reports [REDACTED] indicate the number of new refugees may have reached nearly 7,000 during February, placing severe strains on local resources. [REDACTED]

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan Tamil separatist leaders, renewing claims that the refugees are an international problem, called on the UN to accuse Colombo of genocide. [REDACTED] the genocide theme predominated when more than 6,000 Tamil students marched earlier this week in Madurai in support of Tamil refugees and called on Gandhi to protect Tamil lives. [REDACTED]

Comment: Tamil demands for an international investigation may put pressure on Colombo to come back to the bargaining table, but they are also meant to influence New Delhi to consider military intervention. Gandhi, however, like his mother, strongly opposes internationalizing what he considers a regional issue. His quick promise of support to the refugees probably is aimed at defusing Sri Lankan Tamil efforts to involve outside powers in the affair. He also has ruled out, for the time being, the possibility of Indian intervention. [REDACTED]

Both countries will continue to try to avoid a military incident, but increased Indian patrolling and Sri Lankan naval surveillance in the narrow Palk Strait make a clash even more likely. In recognition of that danger, Colombo has renewed its call for joint patrols, and New Delhi has, for the first time, said it will consider such a move. [REDACTED]

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23 February 1985